



SECRETARY OF STATE STATE OF INDIANA

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SECRETARY OF STATE

Letter to the Editor
By Indiana Secretary of State Todd Rokita

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The Importance of Indiana's Absentee Voting Laws

More than ninety percent of Indiana voters who cast ballots in our elections do so in person. We show up at the community center, the township volunteer fire hall, and the corner church to join with our neighbors to elect our representatives.

There are times when we cannot go to the polling place to vote in person. It may be because of illness, work, or traveling away from home on business or for pleasure. On those occasions, Indiana law provides the option of an absentee ballot, which permits you to vote your ballot before election day and entrust it to an election official, who then arranges for your ballot to be processed and counted with the other ballots from your precinct on election day. In general election years (like 1998 and 2002), about 7 percent of Indiana voters cast absentee ballots. The percentage of absentee ballots is even higher in presidential election years (9.4 percent in 2000).

In Indiana, if you are a disabled voter or a voter at least 65 years of age, you are entitled to request that an absentee ballot be mailed to you. Likewise, if you will be working at your regular place of employment, from 6 am until 6 pm, *the entire time* the polls are open, you can ask for an absentee ballot. If you are confined due to illness or injury, serve as the caregiver for an individual who is confined to their home, or expect to be out of the county on election day, you are also eligible to vote absentee. And now you can vote absentee for any reason at all if you are willing to stop by the county clerk's office during any of the 30 days before election day.

Indiana law also has several safeguards in place for absentee ballot processing designed to protect the voter's right to privacy and the integrity of the election. For example, it is a felony for a person to knowingly deliver an absentee ballot to an absentee voting board or county election board that is not the ballot cast by the absentee voter. It is also a felony for a person to knowingly receive an envelope containing a marked absentee ballot unless the person is a member of the absentee voter's household or an individual who holds the voter's power of attorney. These election law violations are Class D felonies, each punishable by up to three years in prison, a \$10,000 fine, or both.

However, the most grievous harm results when absentee ballots are used by unscrupulous political campaigns as a tool to commit election fraud.

It is one thing for a campaign to wage a vigorous fight while playing by the rules. It is another thing to encourage lies or to exploit the innocent through fraud and intimidation. Our Hoosier integrity is not worth trading for any candidate or political party. We should expect and demand the highest level of integrity from each other in all our dealings -- especially the election of our leaders.

I am pleased that several county prosecutors are currently investigating these matters and, in some cases, have already filed charges against individuals who have allegedly committed violations of Indiana election law. County prosecutors and law enforcement officials enjoy my full cooperation and support in preserving the integrity of our electoral process.

Additionally, I will continue to examine the process and plan to ask the General Assembly to make reforms to the absentee balloting process. I want to work with men and women of good will in all parties to ensure that absentee voting increases access to the election process while protecting its integrity.

I encourage you, as always, to go to the polls or, *if you qualify*, to vote by absentee ballot. I also encourage the campaigns and political parties to work diligently and honestly – fierce competition is healthy for any democracy. But when it comes to exercising or soliciting our right to vote, we must not permit abuses of the absentee ballot process to impair the integrity of our elections. Whether they are cast in person or by way of an absentee ballot, we must have supreme confidence that our ballots are being cast and counted in accordance with the law.

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